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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM: SUN TZU REVISITED**

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## **FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM: SUN TZU REVISITED**

“There’s no piece of real estate. It’s not like a state or a country. The notion of deterrence doesn’t really apply here. There’s no treaty to be negotiated, there’s no arms control agreement that’s going to guarantee our safety and security. The only way you can deal with them is to destroy them.”<sup>1</sup>

Vice President Dick Cheney

Images of hijacked airliners impacting the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are forever burned in our memories. Such scenes previously were the work of Hollywood producers and filmmakers, but on September 11, 2001 the events became all too real. President Bush vowed that these acts of war perpetrated on America would not go unpunished. Thus began the war on terrorism. The character and conduct of this war will be different from any previous, as alluded to by Vice President Cheney. Mass formations of soldiers facing off on a battlefield will not play a role but this will be a war none-the-less.

Approximately 2500 years ago, a Chinese General named Sun Tzu began what may have been the first written attempt at understanding the art of war and establishing basic principles concerning the conduct of war. Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War” describes the important factors, for sovereign and general alike, on how best to execute a war. Many warfare strategists such as Clausewitz, Mahan, Liddell-Hart, and Warden, have written since Sun Tzu’s time and even though Hart and Warden may have been the only two to read Sun Tzu’s work, they all have remarkable similarity to many of Sun Tzu’s principles. Sun Tzu wrote during an era when the resources of weapons and tactics were limited compared to today. The horse cavalry was not

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<sup>1</sup> “CIA Prepares ‘Threat Matrix’ For National Security Officials,” *The Washington Post*, 21 October 2001.

even envisioned as a tool for warfare in his time. This reality may account for why many of his principles get to the core of warfare and endure to this day. With such a huge time span between Sun Tzu and Warden, and with such striking similarities between all of their works, one has to ponder whether there are certain enduring basics to the proper conduct of any war. This paper will analyze our current war on terrorism using applicable Sun Tzu principles. It will postulate that the U.S. can be successful in the war on terrorism if it knows the enemy, attacks the mind of the commander, and uses the indirect approach.

## **KNOW THE ENEMY**

“Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”<sup>2</sup> This quote from Sun Tzu, in my opinion, is the best representation of his overall approach. It implies the need to learn about the enemy (his objectives, strengths, weaknesses, what he values, etc.). Secondly, evaluate one’s own capabilities and situation (political, economic, military, etc.) and finally utilize this knowledge to figure out the best way to attack the opposition. Knowing the enemy is the hardest part of this overall equation for success.

Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda network have been linked to many terrorist acts against the U.S. to include the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Bin Laden and his organization are the initial targets of the global war on terrorism. It is estimated that al Qaeda membership stands between 3,000-5,000 men, with the senior leadership based in Afghanistan. This landlocked country and the ruling Taliban government provide political security and act as a geographic shield, a situation that actually has been strengthened by international sanctions. The al Qaeda network is organized in small cells located in approximately 50 countries.<sup>3</sup> “Al Qaeda physically and/or

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel B. Griffith, *SUN TZU THE ART OF WAR* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Phil Hirschhorn, et al., “Blowback,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, vol. 13, no. 8 (1 August 2001).

ideologically penetrates international and Islamic NGO's (non-governmental organizations) throughout the world. Thus the al Qaeda infrastructure is inseparably enmeshed with the religious, social, and economic fabric of Muslim communities worldwide."<sup>4</sup>

Most Americans are dismayed by the recent terrorist actions and struggle to understand why we are the targets of such hatred. There is confusion as to what the terrorists really want. Is this a clash of Islam versus the West or simply a matter of removing U.S. troops from Saudi soil? It is remarkable that there are still questions about the objectives of bin Laden and al Qaeda considering the U.S. has been targeted by this organization for nearly 10 years. "Based on his own statements and those of his close associates, bin Laden wants to be portrayed as a latter-day caliph, or supreme ruler, in the image of the Prophet Muhammad's successors—a figure who can unite all of Islam."<sup>5</sup> In addition, he wants to remove all Americans from Saudi soil and stop the flood of Western culture into the Islamic world. "Bin Laden believes that the United States is the 'Great Satan.' He sees Islam under assault from a rising tide of secularized modernity led by America and corrupt Arab governments and monarchies."<sup>6</sup> This knowledge allows us to understand that Osama bin Laden aspires to escalate the conflict into a war of Islam versus the West (as predicted in the *Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington).

It is critical that the fight against terrorism does not become a war against Islam. Failure to contain the scope of the conflict risks the possibility of escalation to world war proportions. The U.S. should make every effort to retain as many Muslim countries in the coalition as possible. This may require exceptional compensation in the form of economic, military and/or

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Bedlington, "Not Who You Think," *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2001, sec. B, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

humanitarian assistance. Coalition countries should continue to emphasize to the world that this is not a war against Islam. Also, any non-Muslim terrorist groups should be pursued as soon as able to show the remainder of the Islamic world that they are not the sole targets. In addition, consideration and deference should be given to unique Muslim issues, at least until the fighting in Afghanistan is completed. If bombing during Ramadan will drive out the Arab Muslim countries and split the coalition, then we should suspend aerial bombing. However, there are arguments for continuing the air campaign during this time. Most notably that this is war and there are numerous cases of war being conducted by Muslims during Ramadan. Advice from experts in intelligence and the State Department should be heeded.

With bin Laden's objectives and organization in mind, the focus now turns to strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps the greatest strength of al Qaeda is that these terrorists are fanatical Muslims willing to give their lives for Islam. Efforts can be made to influence the fanatics reasoning through the use of moderate Islamic clerics who claim that this practice is against true Islam, or through an information campaign (which is discussed later in the paper), but the chances are slim that this will be effective. Short of changing their beliefs, these terrorists must be tracked down and neutralized by death or incarceration. Another strength is that Bin Laden, his followers in Afghanistan, and the Taliban, have the advantage of very unique and rugged terrain, to include an extensive network of underground caves. This presents a problem that cannot be solved with airpower alone yet risks the loss of lives if large numbers of ground forces are employed. Using the Northern Alliance and any other Afghani forces in the fight will help reduce the risk since they are also knowledgeable of the terrain. Special Forces and secret agents will not be able to destroy the Taliban quickly but as long as the U.S. is willing to pursue this problem over an extended period, it will keep the al Qaeda leadership hunkered down and the

Taliban government ineffective. This enemy also enjoys the advantage of time and patience. The U.S. must be willing to fight this war over the long term and show a great deal of patience. Calls for results and escalation so soon are dangerous and should not deter the leadership.

One of the strongest weaknesses of al Qaeda is that many Muslims refute bin Laden's tactics. "His horrendous acts sadden and anger a majority of Muslims around the world. They are infuriated to see bin Laden treat violence as an integral part of Islam."<sup>7</sup> Another weakness is al Qaeda's loss of all state sponsored support except for Afghanistan. If the al Qaeda leadership survives beyond the replacement of the Taliban government, they will be on the run with no sanctuary in which to hide. Also, they have been put on the defensive and the U.S. dictates the timing and course of the battle strategy.

### **ATTACK THE MIND OF THE COMMANDER**

Sun Tzu believed fighting a war involved much more than fighting engagements as espoused by Clausewitz. Sun Tzu's primary target is the mind of the opposing commander. He claims that by concentrating on the mind of the enemy, you may not even have to fight physical battles to win a war. "To subdue the enemy's army without fighting is the acme of skill."<sup>8</sup> Sun Tzu advocates attacking the enemy's plans and strategy first, his alliances next, and only then, attack his army. It is interesting to note he advocates the worst policy is to go after the enemy's cities and should be done only if there is no alternative.

Following the effort to know the enemy in a general sense, Sun Tzu says we should try to get into the mind of the enemy commander to better understand his potential strategies and plans. The strategy of the al Qaeda is to use terror to instill fear in the hearts of Americans. They will

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel B. Griffith, *SUN TZU THE ART OF WAR* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 9.

use all means available to accomplish this strategy. “The State Department’s latest annual report on international terrorism states that al Qaeda continues to seek chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capabilities.”<sup>9</sup> The U.S. cannot simply prepare defenses for this level of threat. One way of attacking this strategy is to use the age-old adage: the best defense is a good offense.

Attacking the terrorists before they can use weapons of mass destruction is important.

Americans need to feel safe and confident that the government is pursuing these terrorists throughout the world. In concert, defenses must be improved. “When a government misunderstands the type of movement it is facing, it can blind itself to policy options that could end the insurgency at lower cost.”<sup>10</sup> If the U.S. fails to defeat terrorism now, the risk of paying a higher cost in lives due to a nuclear attack increases dramatically.

Bin Laden’s ultimate plan is to separate the Islamic community from the West by recruiting the Muslim world for holy jihad. The al Qaeda has a broad base appeal to many Muslims who are poor and have little chance for a better life. Many believe that poverty and despair are a breeding ground for terrorism. By elevating the standard of living of these potential terrorists to a level where there is hope and a potential future, the attraction towards terrorism may subside; this is especially true with people living in conditions such as in Afghanistan. This should be a world effort and implemented through the United Nations.

The al Qaeda network needs support for their preparations and activities both in terms of material and funds. An obvious way to attack their strategy is to attack their ability to train for and fund these activities. The training camps have been destroyed and many of the financial assets have been frozen but more needs to be done. Investigation has linked some of the money

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Bedlington, “Not Who You Think,” *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2001, sec. B, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism* (U.S.: Brassey’s, Inc., 1990) 126.



to charities and Swiss bank accounts. It is time for Swiss bank accounts to be opened up and the charities exposed.

From the outset of the war on terrorism, the President has made clear there will be no distinction between terrorists and the states that harbor them. Perhaps the most important strategy the U.S. is pursuing is the elimination of state sponsorship. “The key to anti-terrorism strategy is to eliminate safe havens.”<sup>11</sup> Replacing the Taliban government with a more moderate and tolerant government is a huge step towards solving the immediate terrorist problem. This severs the state sponsorship of Afghanistan to al Qaeda, forcing a disruption in their alliance, while putting all other states that harbor terrorists on notice to rethink their actions.

### **USE THE INDIRECT APPROACH**

“All warfare is based on deception.”<sup>12</sup> This is a very important principle of Sun Tzu’s. He fought using an indirect approach when able, not force on force brute strength. Sun Tzu advocated using the “Cheng” forces, the more obvious and known forces, to engage the enemy and use the “Ch’i”, or unexpected forces, to win.<sup>13</sup> “The strategic and tactical doctrines expounded in ‘The Art of War’ are based on deception, the creation of false appearances to mystify and delude the enemy, the indirect approach, ready adaptability to the enemy situation, flexible and coordinated maneuver of separate combat elements, and speedy concentration against points of weakness.”<sup>14</sup> Napoleon was a master at this and it remains an important concept today, even for forces that are overwhelmingly superior. Sun Tzu says to use the Cheng

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Kissinger, “Crucial Phase of America’s Anti-Terrorism Strategy Yet to Come,” *San Diego Tribune*, 28 October 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel B. Griffith, *SUN TZU THE ART OF WAR* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

forces, in this case our aerial bombing and the Northern Alliance, to engage the Taliban, and win with the Ch'i forces, our special operations forces and possibly our secret agents.

A key requirement for success in using deception and the indirect approach is intelligence gathering. Sun Tzu dedicated one of his 13 chapters to the employment of secret agents. It is worth noting that Clausewitz in some ways disregards the importance of intelligence by not dedicating serious thought to its value. "Secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move."<sup>15</sup> In the global battle against terrorism, CIA agents must be used more aggressively. The U.S. has recognized the importance of this after decades of neglect of our intelligence programs. Funding for HUMINT (Human Intelligence) has been increased and significant restrictions on the use of our secret agents have been lifted.<sup>16</sup> The once taboo practice of assassinations has been brought out of the shadows, an extreme measure to deal with an extreme threat. This is a critical requirement if an offensive approach to terrorism is to be successful.

Another increasingly important avenue of indirect approach is through information operations. The U.S.'s history is replete with examples of being on the reactive side of events and information operations, rather than on the proactive side. The F-117 shoot-down and the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy were both exploited to great extent by Serbia. "By tailoring messages to each national audience, Serbia was able to create dissension within NATO, thereby influencing the respective governments' interest in waging war."<sup>17</sup> If we are going to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>16</sup> Barton Gellman, "CIA Weighs 'Targeted Killing' Missions," *The Washington Post*, " 28 October 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Chuck deCaro, "SOFTWARE & Grand Strategy," in *Cyberwar 3.0: Human Factors in Information Operations and Future Conflict*, ed. Alan D. Campen and Douglas H. Dearth (Fairfax: AFCEA International Press, 2000), 88.

ensure that the war on terrorism doesn't become a clash of civilizations, then we must be more effective responding to issues and shaping the overall message to Muslims.

The war on terrorism should be fought vigorously in the minds of the terrorists. It is a form of "virtual force." The U.S. must develop a very sophisticated information campaign plan with the long term in mind. It should begin by specifically targeting the people in Afghanistan, then move to all Arab Muslims, and finally to all people of Islamic faith. We should use the Islamic religion to challenge bin Laden's interpretations as well as any extremist view. If there is any religious debate, or questions of interpretation, about the actions these terrorists take, then we should aggressively attack it and shape the messages to cause disruptions and cracks in the terrorists' foundations. An effort to remind the Afghani's how bad life has become under the Taliban rule in comparison to how much better it might be with the help of the U.S. and the United Nations should be made.

The U.S. needs to be aggressive with TV, radio, cyberspace, and all other available means. A massive network of linked Web pages, in many foreign languages, must be created to get people reading our messages, talking on-line, and engaged throughout the Islamic world. In the long run, the U.S. must encourage moderate thinking and actions through the deliberate and prolonged use of all means to shape the battlefield of the mind. In Afghanistan, the low technology, or no technology status of the country presents challenges. Radio transmissions from our flying assets will have limited effect since most Afghani's do not have radios to listen to. Dropping radios for the Afghani's to use would be worth the money and effort.

Another indirect approach unique to the war on terrorism is the attack on the financial assets of the terrorist network as previously mentioned. Modern information and communication capabilities allow the U.S. to track and target the funding sources so critical to al Qaeda

operations. It is literally hitting them in their wallet. The form of global terrorism that bin Laden has developed does not come cheap. The U.S. has recognized this vulnerability and has gone after the financial networks. This has required the assistance of the international community, in concert as never before seen, to share information and techniques in order to freeze bank accounts and identify sources of funding. This level of cooperation may diminish as the coalition adapts to changing events but it has already proven beneficial. Numerous false accounts, some using charities as fronts, have been flushed out and rendered ineffective. Many millions of dollars have been identified and frozen. This alone will cause serious damage to al Qaeda and will require a considerable amount of time to recover from.

## **CONCLUSION**

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, “This is not a war against an individual, a group, a religion or a country. Rather, our opponent is a global network of terrorist organizations and their state sponsors, committed to denying free people the opportunity to live as they choose.”<sup>18</sup> This war on terrorism is unlike any war conducted in U.S. history. Sun Tzu, approximately 2500 years ago, opined his major points to win at warfare. His principles of knowing the enemy, attacking the mind of the commander, and using the indirect approach are extremely relevant today and can help in the unconventional war against terrorism.

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<sup>18</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, “A New Kind of War,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2001.